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V.—THE ROUND TABLE.

In the Arthurian romances the term Round Table is employed in three significations. Most commonly it denotes a brotherhood of knights; very rarely—though of course this is the primary meaning—it is used actually for the table itself; and finally it designates a courtly festival celebrated by Arthur on some great feast day, usually Pentecost. This last meaning of the expression is the one with which the present paper is especially concerned.

A few preliminary words, however, about the other two. In Wace the knights of the Round Table are personal attendants on King Arthur, permanently attached to his service.¹ Praised through all the world,² they appear to be sharply distinguished from those foreign warriors who had been attracted to the court by its reputation for courtesy, valor, and liberality.³ The main characteristic emphasized by both Wace and Layamon is that the knights sat at the Round Table in perfect equality and were served alike.⁴ Their numbers, in the later stories, vary; sometimes there are fifty,⁵ sometimes one hundred and fifty,⁶ and again two hundred and fifty,⁷ while according to Layamon the table could seat sixteen hundred.⁸ The original fifty were selected

¹ *Le Roman de Brut*, par Le Roux de Lincy, Rouen, 1836; I. 10558.

² *Id.*, 9982, 13676.

³ *Id.*, 9994, 10553, 13672; in Layamon the fight preceding the establishment of the Round Table is by natives against foreigners, *uncuhte kempen* (*Layamon's Brut*, by Sir Frederic Madden, London, 1847, II, p. 534).

⁴ Wace, 10,000 *seq.*; Layamon, II, 539–540.

⁵ *Roman de Merlin*, Sommer, London, 1894, p. 57; *Huth Merlin*, Paris et Ulrich, Paris, 1886, I, p. 96.

⁶ *Huth*, II, 62.

⁷ *Roman*, p. 152 *et al.*

⁸ P. 539.

by Merlin;¹ the forty-nine (leaving the vacant perilous seat) added to the hundred sent to Arthur by Leodogran, were also selected by Merlin, while their names were found miraculously inscribed on their seats.² Eight, to replace those killed in battle, were added by Arthur on the advice of Pellinore, and at the same time their names were mysteriously substituted for those of the dead.³ This appearance of the name was essential to a choice, and the new knight must be better than the one he displaced.⁴ In the romances, though there are occasional inconsistencies, the general attitude of the fellowship is represented by Tristan who, on becoming a member, swears to increase the honor of the Round Table and never to fight against it, except in sport.⁵ To use Malory's words, "ony of hem will be loth to have adoo with other."⁶ This attitude suggests the wide-spread primitive folk-custom of kinship through commensality.⁷ In the etymological sense of the word, they were *companions* and, as brethren of one blood, they were "to support one another in life and avenge one another's death." After the first feast at the Round Table, they desire to remain together permanently, for although many had not been acquainted before, they now love one another as a son loves his father.⁸ They lived in peace like brothers german.⁹

According to one account, the Table was made by Arthur,¹⁰

¹ *Roman*, 57; *Huth*, I, 96. For the importance of this number among the Celts, see J. Loth, *L'année Celtique*, Paris, 1904, p. 46.

² *Huth*, II, 65-67.

³ *Id.*, II, 169-170.

⁴ Loeseth, *Tristan*, Paris, 1890, p. 149.

⁵ Loeseth, *Tristan*, p. 149, § 206.

⁶ Sommer's edition, London, 1889, Bk. viii, ch. iv, p. 279.

⁷ Hartland, *Legend of Perseus*, London, 1894, II, 248 *seq.* and 277 *seq.*

⁸ *Huth*, I, 97; *Roman*, 57.

⁹ *Huth*, II, 67: "Each spake with other as it were his brother.—Layamon, 540.

¹⁰ Wace, 9998.

or for Arthur, by a clever workman of Cornwall;¹ according to another, it was made by Merlin for Arthur's father, Uther;² in a third version, it was owned by Leodogran, father of Guinevere, and given to Arthur on his marriage.³ Here we evidently have a rather clumsy attempt to reconcile conflicting traditions and to group them around the central figure, Arthur.⁴ It may at least be affirmed that three Round Tables have survived in our tales; how many others have been lost to memory, we cannot even conjecture. In Wace the purpose of the Round Table is to provide equally honorable seats for the knights, each of whom thought himself the best. Layamon repeats this idea, prefacing his account of the making of the Table with a narrative of a bloody fight at one of Arthur's Christmas feasts in London.⁵ In the Merlin and Grail stories, we lose sight of this idea of equality, and the Round Table has a religious significance, which is not at all clear. It was to symbolize the Trinity, as the third of a group of tables, the other two being that of the Last Supper and a square one made by Joseph in the desert to receive the Grail. It will bring to Uther great benefit and honor and many marvels will be accomplished.⁶ No description of the Round Table is anywhere furnished,⁷ though Layamon says it was made of wood,⁸ and had the marvelous property of seating sixteen hundred, yet being easily carried wherever Arthur might ride. In Wolfram, however, when the original is left at Nantes a new one is

¹ Layamon, 538 *seq.*

² *Roman*, 97; *Huth*, I, 96.

³ *Huth*, II, 62, and *Introduction*, I, pp. xxvi and xliii.

⁴ Paulin Paris, *Romans de la Table Ronde*, II, 126.

⁵ Pp. 534 *seq.*

⁶ *Roman*, 55; *Huth*, I, 95; Hucher, *Le Saint-Graal*, I, 253.

⁷ Wolfram conceives it as a circle with a vacant space in the midst; Martin, *Parzival*, Halle, 1900-1903, st. 309 and 775; Hertz, *Parzival*, Stuttgart, 1898, p. 513, n. 127.

⁸ 539-540.

improvised by laying cloths on the grass.¹ Two frequently recurring features are not mentioned by Wace and Layamon; the names on the seats as a sign of election,² and the vacant seat or siege perilous, reserved for him who shall accomplish the adventure of the Grail,³ and who shall terminate the three marvelous adventures of the kingdom of Logres, an achievement which will bring great joy and end Arthur's grief.⁴ A knight who attempts to occupy this vacant seat disappears like lead.⁵ In the Gerbert continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval*, we are told that a fairy had sent the perilous seat to Arthur. Six knights who had sat in it, had been swallowed up by the earth, but they reappear when Perceval accomplishes the feat.⁶ On the whole, the characteristics of the Round Table imply some mystical and religious signification, a fact in thorough consonance with the continual association of its heroes with magic, fairyland and the other world.⁷

¹ St. 309 *seq.* In the *Roman de Merlin*, also, though the Round Table is not mentioned, the equivalent festival is held in the fields, p. 437.

² *Huth*, II, 67; *Tristan*, §§ 206 and 377.

³ *Roman*, 57 *seq.*; *Huth*, I, 96 *seq.*

⁴ *Huth*, II, 66.

⁵ *Roman*, 60.

⁶ Nutt, *Studies in the Legend of the Holy Grail*, London, 1888, p. 23.

⁷ The Round Table, which is still preserved at Winchester, is thus described by Milner (*History of Winchester*, London, n. d., vol. II, p. 204):—
 "The chief curiosity in this ancient chapel, now termed the county hall, is Arthur's Round Table, as it is called. This hangs up at the east end of it (in the *nisi prius* court) and consists of stout oak plank. . . . The figure of King Arthur is painted on it, and also the names of his twenty-four knights, as they have been collected from the romances of the 14th and 15th centuries. The costumes and characters here seen, are those of the reign of Henry VIII, when this table appears to have been first painted; the style of which has been copied each time that it has since been painted afresh. At the time we are speaking of, and even in the middle of the 15th century, this table was certainly believed to have been actually made and placed in the castle by its supposed founder, the renowned British Prince Arthur who lived in the early part of the 6th century. Hence it was exhibited as Arthur's Table, by Henry VIII, to his illustrious guest

The Round Table was not used for ordinary meals, but only on festive occasions.¹ Indeed it gave its name to the entertainment itself; we often read that Arthur held a Table Round. Merlin instructed Uther to hold these feasts three times each year,² and we hear of such at Pentecost,³ at Christmas,⁴ at All Saints,⁵ and at Mid-August.⁶ Pentecost, it is well known, was the chief festal day of Arthur. In Wolfram's *Parzival*, Round Tables are held to celebrate any happy event,⁷ but this is probably an invention of the poet. In the *Vulgate Merlin* the vassals are ordered by Uther, after the first festival, to attend all subsequent feasts without further summons.⁸ The magnificence of these entertainments, including such features as the bestowal of gifts and the presence of jongleurs, may be simply a general characteristic of mediæval feasts ascribed by the poets to Arthur on account of his mythic reputation as a dispenser of plenty.⁹

the Emperor Charles." See also vol. I, p. 246. This is probably the object exhibited at Hunscriet at the marriage of Philip II to Queen Mary; Wace, II, note to pp. 166-7. Camden mentions it as hanging up at Winchester, *Britannia*, London, 1695, col. 120. A picture of it is given in Hone's *Year Book*, London, 1832, p. 81. With its rays proceeding outward from the centre, it has all the appearance of a sun-symbol.

¹ During the Middle Ages dining tables were brought in for meals and removed afterwards (Schultz, *Höf. Leben*, I, 80, 432) and this custom is presupposed in several of the Arthurian stories, where there are tables, rather than one table.

² *Roman*, 58. ³ *Id.*, 57. ⁴ *Id.*, 58. ⁵ *Id.*, 60. ⁶ *Id.*, 436.

⁷ When Arthur receives news from Gawain, he holds a Round Table; *Parz.*, st. 654.

⁸ *Roman*, 40.

⁹ "*La Table ronde est ici la réunion des vassaux, des hommes du roi, aux quatre grandes fêtes de l'année, Noël, Pâques, la Pentecôte et la Saint-Jean; et l'intention manifeste des romanciers est encore ici de rapporter à l'ancienne cour des rois bretons l'origine de tous les usages auxquels se conformaient les grands souverains du douzième siècle, Louis VII, Philippe-Auguste et Henry d'Angleterre. Tenir cour et tenir Table ronde était alors une même chose, dont on voulait que le premier exemple remontât au prophète Merlin, et au roi Uter-Pendragon, comme aussi l'usage de distribuer des livrées et de faire présents aux dames qui venaient embellir de*

Other traits are more clearly individual. All the companions, as has been already said, have equally good food and drink¹ as well as equally honorable places.² While the fellowship is composed exclusively of men, and the seats at the table are only for members,³ ladies are required at these festivals⁴ and each lady must have her knight.⁵ Another peculiarity was Arthur's custom to refrain from eating until he had heard of some adventure.⁶ The duration of the feast, at its foundation by Uther, is eight days, and the king will not sit till he has served the knights,⁷ or till he has seen them served.⁸ The Round Table banquet described by Wolfram in the fifteenth book of *Parzival* has some further interesting details. The Table is a cloth laid on the grass in the open field, and it is measured off by moonlight.⁹ The knights wear wreaths on their heads and every lady has her *ami*.¹⁰

leur présence ces grandes réunions.—P. Paris, *Romans de la T. R.*, II, 64. The truth of this statement should not blind us to the fact that there are also folk elements in these stories.

¹ Layamon, p. 539 *seq.*

² *Ib.* and Wace, 9994 *seq.*

³ See above, concerning the names on the seats.

⁴ *Huth*, I, 96; *Roman*, 56, 436; *Lai du Cor* (Wulff, Lund, 1888) opening lines. In this last case, however, the presence of women is required for the chastity test. The great feast given by Arthur on his coronation at Pentecost, as it is described by Geoffrey, Bk. IX, ch. xii *seq.*, in many respects resembles a Round Table. Both sexes are present, though separated for some ceremonies, and we have the religious exercises, banquet and sports. For all these circumstances, compare the feast of Carman in Ireland.

⁵ *Parz.*, st. 216, 776.

⁶ See Hertz, *Parz.*, p. 512, n. 125.

⁷ *Roman*, 57.

⁸ *Huth*, I, 97.

⁹ St. 775. See Martin's note to l. 21. The earlier banquet (st. 309) is also in an open field:

man sprach ir reht uf bluomen velt :
dane irte stûde noch gezelt.

"Chrestien sagt nichts davon," remarks Herz, *Parz.*, p. 513, n. 127.

¹⁰ *Parz.*, st. 776.

Preceding the festive meal, there is a procession and a display of horsemanship.¹

Throughout the Middle Ages, certain knightly exercises, distinguished by the chroniclers from ordinary tournaments, continued to be called Round Tables. The popularity of the Romances, the heroes of which became models of chivalry, undoubtedly had a leading part in the establishment of these imitations of Arthur's court,² yet there may have been in their origin also elements derived from folk custom. "At this feast," says Schultz,³ "the knights assumed the names of Arthur's heroes; beyond this nothing is known of the arrangements of the sport; it must, however, have closely resembled the tourney, though it was less dangerous, for it was fought on horseback and with blunt lances. At any rate ladies were present and a banquet played a leading part." That such contests were nevertheless not entirely devoid of peril is shown in an account by Matthew Paris of one held at Winchester, wherein a distinguished knight was slain.⁴ It is furthermore well known that Edward III constructed at Windsor a building called the Round Table and that he celebrated these feasts with great magnificence.⁵

¹ *Id.*, 777.

² Tournaments are said to have been a late importation from France. Du Cange, *Glossarium*, Paris, 1850, Diss. v, vol. vii, p. 24.

³ *Das Höfische Leben zur Zeit der Minnesinger*, 2nd ed., Leipzig, 1889, II, p. 117.

⁴ A. D. 1252, "Anno quoque sub eodem milites angliae, ut exercitio militari peritiam suam et strenuitatem experirentur, constituerunt, non ut in hastiludio, quod Torneamentum dicitur, sed potius in illo ludo militari, qui Mensa Rotunda dicitur, vires suas attemptarent. Duo igitur milites electissimi, Ernaldus scilicet de Munteinni et Rogerus de Leneburne, dum se lanceis mutuo impeterent, Ernaldus letaliter vulneratus, praeceps cadens obiit interfectus, qui in militari exercitio nulli in Anglia secundus censebatur."—Matthaei Parisiensis *Historia Anglorum*, Rolls Series, vol. III, p. 124.

⁵ Sir Nicholas Harris Nicholas, *Observations on the Institution of the most noble Order of the Garter*, *Archæologia*, xxxi; see p. 104, for the feasts of

Not only such tournaments, but also periodical gatherings of bards were called Round Tables and, while the former, as has just been said, are in all probability an offspring of the literary influence of Arthurian romance, the latter are by tradition directly connected with Arthur himself. It was said that, under his protection, a chair of poetry was established at Caerleon by the bard Maelgyn Hir and the system of the Round Table instituted.¹ Another tradition, the age of which is not known,² but which Zimmer calls "jüngere Fabelei und Combination,"³ states that about 1077 Rhys ab Tewdwr, who had been obliged to pass some time in Brittany, brought back with him, on his return to Wales, the institution of the Round Table, which had there been forgotten, and reestablished it for the bards as it had been at Caerleon on Usk in the days of Arthur.⁴

In this sense the Round Table is obviously identical with the Eisteddfod. And here we come to a very interesting particular, derived from the manuscript of a writer who died

1344 and 1345; pp. 108-9, for the magnificence of the entertainments; p. 151, "domum quae rotunda tabula vocaretur," Walsingham; *ib.*, "Rex Angliae Rotundam Tabulam ccc militum tenuit apud Wyndesoure, et totidem dominarum, pro quâ excessivi sumptus facti sunt, Cotton MS. See further Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes*, London, 1810, p. 128, who recognizes that the Round Table is a joust rather than a tournament. An interesting Round Table is cited by San Marte in a note to Geoffrey, p. 420 (ad ann. 1284): "Item convenerunt Comites, Barones, Milites de Regno Angliae, ac etiam multi proceres transmarini, circa festum Beati Petri quod dicitur ad vincula ad rotundam tabulam apud Neubin, juxta Snowden, praeconizatum, in choreis et hastiludicis adinvicem colludentibus, in signum triumphi contra Wallensium proterviam expediti." See also Du Cange, *Glossarium*, s. v. *Tabula Rotunda*. The examples include Spain, France, Germany and the Netherlands, as well as England; sufficient proof that these knightly Round Tables were founded on the Romances, and not *vice versa*.

¹ F. Walther, *Das alte Wales*, Bonn, 1859, p. 272.

² Loth, *Mabinogion*, I, p. 17.

³ Gött. gel. Anz., 1890, p. 796, note.

⁴ Loth and Zimmer, *loc. cit.*, and *Das Alte Wales*, p. 267.

in 1616. It concerns "the gorsedd or court under the authority of which the Eisteddfod is held as a sort of session, as its name indicates, for letters and music. The gorsedd is held in the open air, a circle of stones being formed, with a stone bigger than the others in the middle; the proceedings are opened with prayer by the presiding druid as he is called; afterwards he goes on to admit to degrees the candidates recommended by persons technically competent to do so. When all the business is over, the company goes in a procession to the building fixed for holding the Eisteddfod, which it is necessary to have announced at a gorsedd held a year at least previously. As regards the gorsedd itself, the rule is 'that it be held in a conspicuous place within sight and hearing of the country and the lord in authority, and that it be face to face with the sun and the eye of light, as there is no power to hold a gorsedd under cover or at night, but only where and as long as the sun is visible in the heavens.'"¹ Can there be the slightest doubt that we have here a remnant of some primitive pagan rite?

The ceremony of placing the stones in a circle suggests a connection with the roundness of Arthur's Table. "It

¹ Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as illustrated by Celtic Heathendom*, London, 1898, pp. 208-9. The *Century Dictionary* derives *Eisteddfod* from two Welsh words meaning *sitting* and *circle*. For the circle of stones within which a gorsedd is held, see *Cambrian Journal*, 1855, p. 155, and 1857, pp. 8 *seq.* On p. 100 (1857), it is stated that the stones or turf of the circle are used as chairs; also that there may be four such meetings in a year, at Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide and St. John's Festival. On p. 310 of the same volume occurs the following account: "A meeting of the Gorsedd was held last Alban Elved on the hill of Bryn Castell y Brenhin, near St. Bride's Major, in Glamorgan, where an appropriate circle of stones had been constructed for the occasion by the joint labor of several of the inhabitants." To this spot the company marched in procession; certain persons entered the bardic enclosure where the introductory ceremonies prescribed by ancient usage were held. The president ascended the Maen Arch and took his station in the "eye of light," or the radial representation of the Divine Name, etc.

would be interesting to understand the signification of the term Round Table," says Rhys.¹ "On the whole it is the table, probably, and not its roundness that is the fact to which to call attention, as it possibly means that Arthur's court was the first early court where those present sat at a table at all in Britain. No such a thing as a common table figures at Conchobar's court or any other described in the old legends of Ireland, and the same applies, we believe, to those of the old Norsemen." However intently we fix our attention on the table, we must still remember the prevailing tendency of the Celts toward circular edifices. The old Irish houses were round,² as were also the ordinary Welsh houses,³ and the Brochs of Scotland.⁴ The palace of the Ulster kings near Derry is a circular building of uncemented stones,⁵ and the only structure at Tara not round or oval was the banqueting hall.⁶ It would, indeed, be practically impossible to enumerate the stone circles and oval or circular mounds scattered over Great Britain, Ireland, and parts of the continent, and described by travelers and archæologists. While roundness is not exclusively a Celtic feature, it is thoroughly characteristic. By the populace, such mounds

¹ *Studies in the Arthurian Legend*, Oxford, 1891, p. 9.

² P. W. Joyce, *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*, New York, 1903, II, p. 20; D'Arbois de Jubainville, *Littérature Celtique*, I, 197.

³ Rhys and Brynmor Jones, *The Welsh People*, New York, 1900, p. 200.

⁴ Joseph Anderson, *Scotland in Pagan Times*, Edinburgh, 1883, ch. IV. See p. 206, "The circular wall . . . is a characteristic feature of Celtic construction."

⁵ Joyce, *Social Hist.*, II, 37.

⁶ *Id.*, 85. Tradition assigns a circular feasting place to one of the early Irish kings. "On montre encore aujourd'hui, sur la montagne de Tara, l'emplacement de la forteresse ou *rath* de Loégaire. C'est une enceinte circulaire formée par deux rangs de fossés concentriques, avec rejet de terre en dedans. Le roi d'Irlande se fit enterrer près de là, en mémoire des bons festins qu'il y avait faits avec ses fidèles vassaux," *Litt. Celtique*, I, 180. Moreover, the origin of the *rath* is ascribed to the mythical Nemed, *id.*, II, 90.

and stone circles are in Great Britain frequently connected with the name of Arthur. It is true that other objects also bear his name, as Arthur's Grave, Chair, Cups and Saucers, Bed, Oven, Seat, Hill, Fountain, Camp;¹ and monuments are also connected with other popular names, such as Robin Hood² and Fingal,³ but Arthur is the most general favorite, and he is especially associated with what are called Round Tables.

The following examples may be cited:—"On an eminence adjoining the park of Mocras Court, in Brecknockshire, is a large and peculiar kind of British cromlech, called Arthur's Table. And at the once famous city, now the decayed village of Caerleon upon Usk,—the Isca Silurum of Antoninus, where the second Augustan Legion was, during a long period, in garrison,—are the remains of a Roman Amphitheatre, in a bank of earth heaped up in an oval form sixteen feet high, and now called Arthur's Round Table."⁴ Between Castle Cary and Yeovil, there is a hill, encircled by four trenches and walls, containing about twenty acres full of ruins, which is by antique report one of the places of Arthur's Round Table.⁵ "Near Denbigh 'there is, in the

¹ R. T. Glennie, *Arthurian Localities*, Edinburgh, 1869; Chalmer's *Caledonia*, London, 1810, I, 244, note m. There are also the Great and Little Arthur among the Scilly Isles, interesting for their barrows. The earliest known reference to an Arthurian locality dates from the year 1113 in Cornwall, "ubi ostenderunt nobis cathedram et furnum illius famosi secundum fabulas Britannorum regis Arturi ipsamque terram ejusdem Arturi esse dicebant."—Zimmer, *Zs. für franz. Sprache und Litt.*, XII, 109.

² E. g., Robin Hood's Pennystone. "It is fathered upon Robin Hood, because that noted outlaw was much in these parts, and the country people here attribute everything of the marvelous to him, as in Cornwall they do to King Arthur."—*Archæologia*, II, 362. It is interesting to note that Robin Hood became Lord, and Maid Marian Lady, of the May. Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes*, 312.

³ Circles in Buteshire, *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, v, 52.

⁴ R. T. Glennie, *Arthurian Localities*, p. 9.

⁵ *Id.*, p. 10, citing Selden's note on Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*, Works, II, 724.

Paroch of *Llansannan* in the Side of a stony Hille, a Place wher there be 24 Holes or Places in a Roundel for Men to sitte in, but sum lesse, and sum bigger, cutte oute of the mayne Rok by Mannes Hand; and there Children and Young Men cumming to seke their Catelle use to sitte and play. Sum caulle it *the Rounde Table*. Kiddes use ther communely to play and skip from sete to Sete' (Leland, *Itinerary*, v, pp. 62, 63). The remains of what would appear to have been a Roman Camp overlooking Redwharf Bay, or Traeth Coch, in Anglesea, is locally called Burdd Arthur, or Arthur's Round Table."¹ On a mountain called Keon bryn in Gower, "there is a vast unwrought stone (probably about twenty ton weight) supported by six or seven others that are not above four foot high, and these are set in a circle, some on end and some edge wise, or sidelong, to bear the great one up . . . the common people call it Arthur's stone."² There are also Gwaly Vilast or Bwrdd Arthur in Lhan Boudy parish, "a rude stone about ten yards in circumference, and above three foot thick, supported by four pillars, which are about two foot thick; and Buarth Arthur or Meinen Gwj'r, on a mountain near Kîl y maen lhwjd, a circular stone monument."³ In Meirionydshire, "about two miles from Harlech there's a remarkable monument call'd Koeten Arthur. It's a large stone-Table somewhat of an oval form, but rude and ill-shaped."⁴ We pass to Westmoreland. "A little before the Loder joins the Emot, it passes by a large round entrenchment, with a plain piece of ground in the middle, and a passage into it on either side. . . . It goes by the name of King Arthur's Round Table;

¹ *Arth. Loc.*, 7, 8.

² Camden's *Britannia*, newly translated into English with large additions and improvements, Edmund Gibson, London, 1695, col. 620.

³ *Id.*, 628.

⁴ *Id.*, 661.

and 'tis possible enough that it might be a Justing-place. . . . However, that it was never designed for a place of strength, appears from the trenches being on the in-side. Near this, is another great Fort of Stones, heap'd up in form of a horse-shoe, and opening towards it; call'd by some King Arthur's Castle, and by others Mayburgh (or as vulgarly Maybrough) which probably is but a modern name."¹ At Stirling there is still another Round Table of Arthur. It is mentioned in Barbour's *Bruce*, in Sir David Lindsay's *Complaynt of the Papingo*,² and in William of Worcester's *Itinerary*,³ but it is now called the King's Knot. "Within the space formerly occupied by the royal gardens, is a very remarkable piece of antiquity, known by the name of the King's Knot, consisting of a central mound in the form of a table, surrounded at the distance of a few feet by another in the form of a bench, of nearly equal height, and again at a greater distance by a kind of low esplanade, and this once more by what appear to have been canals or ditches."⁴

¹ Camden, 817-818; see also *Arth. Loc.*, 74. Scott mentions this place in the *Bridal of Triermain*, Canto I, §. VII, and note. Murray's *Guide* (1869) describes Mayborough as "a circular enclosure, about 100 yards in diameter, formed by a broad ridge of rounded stones, heaped up to a height of 16 feet." In the centre is a large roughly hewn stone. Note the connection of Arthur's Round Table with May.

² *Bruce*, ed. John Jamieson, Glasgow, 1869, Book IX, l. 559:

"And be newth the castell went **thai** sone,
Rycht by the Round Table away."

In a note, p. 438, are printed Lyndsay's lines:

"Adieu, fair Snowdown, with thy towris hie,
Thy chapell royal, park, and tabill round;
May, June, and July, would I dwell in the."

³ Rex Arthurus custodiebat le round table in castro de Styrl yng aliter Snowdon West Castle. Skene, *Four Ancient Books*, I, 57.

⁴ *New Stat. Acct.*, VIII, 406; *Arth. Loc.*, 42. Arthur's Oven is also at this spot; *New Stat. Acct.*, VIII, 357, and Camden, 921: Camden speaks of "a confus'd appearance of a little antient city . . . (the common people) call it Camelot."

It is a notable fact that not one of the objects thus commonly known as Arthur's Round Table could possibly have been used as a banqueting board, nor do they often resemble a table at all. In some cases it may be admitted that the holding of a Round Table Tournament could have given its name to a place; but, on the other hand, in these particular spots no such tournaments are known to have taken place, in some none could have taken place, while at the castles at which these sports were actually held, there are no Round Tables known to the peasantry. Much allowance may also be made for the exaggeration of popular fancy, yet it is difficult to understand how a big stone, a mound, a wall, and a druidical circle, should each and all have suggested a Round Table. Some other explanation appears to be necessary.

A hint is furnished by the fact that, in the Merlin Romance, the erection of the circle at Stonehenge by Uther as a monument to his dead brother and to the others who fell in the battle of Salisbury, immediately precedes the founding of the Round Table.¹ In Geoffrey the erection of this Giants' Dance is ascribed to Aurelius, though Uther is the one who, with Merlin's assistance, brings the stones from Ireland.² When they are ready, Aurelius summons all the people at Pentecost to celebrate the erection of the sepulchral monument with great joy and honor.³ The feast is regally held for four days, and on this occasion Aurelius crowns himself, fills all vacant positions, and rewards his followers with gifts, all of which circumstances are exactly reproduced in Arthur's great feast at Pentecost described further on.⁴

While many circles and mounds were sepulchral, it is highly probable that they were also used for religious rites

¹ *Roman*, 53; *Huth*, 92.

² *Id.*, ch. xii.

³ Bk. viii, ch. x *seq.*

⁴ *Id.*, Bk. ix, ch. xii.

and other popular gatherings.¹ There is, indeed, a curious connection between the abodes of the dead and the festivities of the folk. The great stated assemblies of the Irish took place at well known pagan cemeteries,² and in England, even late in the Middle Ages, fairs were held in churchyards, till the scandal of it drove them to less sacred spots.³ It is certain that local tradition and nomenclature frequently point out these sepulchral monuments as places of assembly and of worship.⁴ At some of them, indeed, ceremonials of ancient origin have, till quite recently, continued to be held.

Émile Souvestre writes:⁵ “C’était encore le temps des anciens usages; tous les jeunes gens et toutes les jeunes filles, non mariés, depuis seize ans jusqu’à trente, se réunissaient ce jour-là sur une lande, près d’une *ville de Korigans*,⁶ pour danser librement loin des yeux de leurs parents. Les jeunes filles portaient à leurs justins du lin en fleurs, et les jeunes garçons à leurs chapeaux, des épis verts. Au moment d’entrer en danse, chaque amoureux prenait son amoureuse par le main, il la conduisait au grand *dolmen*, tous deux y

¹ Forbes Leslie, *Early Races of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1866, ch. v and ch. ix; James Fraser, *Transac. Inverness Scientif. Soc. and Field Club*, vol. II, 1880-83, p. 379.

² Joyce, *Social Hist.*, II, 434.

³ Hampson, *Medii Aevi Kalendarium*, I, 355.

⁴ *Jour. Anthropol. Inst.*, vol. 30, pp. 61-69; *Archæologia*, XXI, 450, “The Kirk,” a circle; *New Stat. Acct.*, III, 61, Tumulus, by tradition the site of a pagan altar: the road leading to it is called the Haxalgate, Haxa meaning high-priestess. *id.*, 451, at Morebottle and Mow, a circle named the Trysting Stones, and another the Tryst. Chalmer’s *Caledonia*, I, 81, Beton Hill, a tumulus in Dumfriesshire; *Archæologia*, XXII, 410, “In the Highlands *clachan* signifies both a circle of stones and a place of worship.” See also Rhys, *Celtic Heathendom*, 194-5, remarks on the circular shrine to Apollo in the island of the Hyperboreans with the harping and chanting of the citizens in honor of the Sun-god; and p. 204, on sacred mounds.

⁵ *Le Foyer Breton*, Paris, 1864, II, 25-26. In a note, it is stated that this usage still exists in the mountains of Cornouailles and in Vannes.

⁶ A druidical circle.

déposaient fleurs et épis, et ils étaient sûrs de les retrouver aussi frais à l'heure du départ s'ils avaient été fidèles."

In the Pyrenees near Bielle, at a large stone circle, there are great festivities in the month of May among the peasantry, who dance and amuse themselves under the trees.¹ At St. Weonards in Herefordshire, the platform of a round tumulus was the usual scene of village fêtes, the spot generally chosen for morris-dancing, and a poplar tree standing in the middle was used as the village May pole.² On Whiteborough (a large tumulus with a fosse round it) on St. Stephen's Down, near Launceston, in Cornwall, there was formerly a great bonfire on Midsummer Eve, round which parties of wrestlers contended for small prizes.³ At the Kirk, a circle in Scotland, "upon the afternoon of every Easter Monday, the lord of the manor of Kirkby resorted to the circle, where all his tenants met him, and games of wrestling, dancing, hurling, and leaping ensued." The last lord who attended broke his thigh in one of the games, and from that time it was discontinued.⁴ Further examples of rites at stone circles on Beltane day are recorded in Jamieson's *Scottish Dictionary*.⁵ Enough has probably been presented to establish a connection between these ancient relics and certain popular agricultural festivals.

If, then, Arthur were a patron of agriculture, and if his Round Table were originally one of these festivals, we could readily understand how so many circles and mounds came to be known by his name. They were the spots at which rustic Round Tables were held.

To find this great monarch of romance the central figure

¹ *Archæolog. Journ.*, xxvii, 225 seq., *Megalithic Remains in the Department of the Basses-Pyrénées*.

² Wright, *The Celt, the Roman, and the Saxon*, London, 1875, p. 89.

³ Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, London, 1853, i, 318.

⁴ *Archæologia*, xxxi, 450. Note the apparent equality of lord and tenants.

⁵ S. v. *Beltane*, see also Frazer, *Golden Bough*, iii, 262.

of a group of farmers and herdsmen should occasion no surprise. It is the habit of aetiological myths to take on the form of heroic adventures.¹ Even in the brilliant court, developed by the later writers, we are occasionally startled by some trace of primitive barbarism or of the struggle of uncivilized man for subsistence. Poetic lovers hardly like to think of Tristan caring for his uncle's pigs. Yet the more authentic the tale, the nearer we get to the corn-field, the pasture, and the forest. Pagan Britain was a savage land. "In the centuries with which we are dealing," says Rhys, speaking of early historic times, "Wales presented a physical aspect very different from that which it does to-day. The greater part was waste land on which the foot of man rarely trod, mere boulder-strewn moorland, or boggy tract. . . . The social and domestic life of the Welsh centred round the timber-built houses of the kings, princes, lords or uchelwyr which were scattered in the valleys and on the lower slopes of the hills."² At every such centre would naturally be held the May, Mid-summer and autumn festivals universal among primitive peoples. There may have been in very early times a priest-king to perform the sacred rites,³ and just as at Rome this priest-king took the place of the individual farm-owner,⁴ so here the separate agricultural festivals might readily have been merged into a single general one.

However this may be, the May gatherings of Arthurian legend are, as Zimmer has pointed out, founded upon the general customs of Celtic antiquity.⁵ At Conchobar's feasts thirty heroes were assembled, and women were also present,

¹ See, for example, Mannhardt, *Myth. Forsch.*, p. 12 seq. For agricultural stories becoming romantic, Nutt, *Fairy Mythology of Shakespeare*, London, 1900.

² *Welsh People*, p. 247.

³ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, I, 7.

⁴ Mannhardt, *Myth. Forsch.*, 195-6.

⁵ *Gött. gel. Anz.*, 1890, p. 518.

as was usual at such gatherings. During the year there were in ancient Ireland three great public festivals: on May 1st (beltene) annually at Tara; at Midsummer (August 1st) annually at Tailtin, and every three years at Carman and at Cruachan; and at the end of summer, from three days before to three days after November 1st, at Emain. The court of the prince was the centre to which the heroes came and from which many of the adventures of the old heroic tales took their start.¹

The fair at Carman included races and sports, law-making, music, story-telling, and the exchange of merchandise, as well as feasting and religious exercises. In origin it is evidently agricultural, the legend being that it was held in honor of Carman, whose magic charms had blighted the land of the Tuatha De Danaan, and who lay buried under a mound upon the plain. "Corn and milk (were promised) to them for holding it, and that the sway of no province in Erin should be upon them, and brave kingly heroes with them, and prosperity in every household, and every fruit in great abundance, and plentiful supplies from their waters. And failure and early grayness of their young kings, if they did not hold it." ²

¹ *Ib.*

² O'Curry, *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, III, 529. There is also a mortuary significance:

Twenty one raths of enduring fame,
In which hosts are under earth confined:
A conspicuous cemetery of high renown,
By the side of delightful noble Carman.
Seven mounds without touching each other,
Where the dead have often been lamented;
Seven plains, sacred without a house,
For the funeral games of Carman.

See also the account of these festivities in Joyce, *Social Hist.*, II, 434 seq., and Rhys, *Celtic Heathendom*, 409 seq. The importance of keeping "early grayness" from their young kings is fully explained in Frazer's *Golden Bough*, *Killing the God*, II, 5 seq.

In many of his characteristics Arthur is distinctly connected with agriculture.¹ Myths of the sun, of dawn, day and night, of summer and winter, seem to be vaguely intermingled with the adventures of his knights. He is, in Wolfram's phrase, the May man,² and his Round Table is properly held at Pentecost, which is identical according to the old style with May day or Beltane.³ This fact is significant. We know that aetiological myths have been invented to explain customs which have ceased to be understood and that this process has been noted particularly in connection with agricultural ceremonial.⁴ Under favorable circumstances, the primitive rites of the ancient Celts, dimly surviving in the tradition of a warlike age, must have originated just such explanations. We are led, therefore, to seek for the features of the Round Table in the mass of folk custom concerned with May day festivities.

We may begin with the general description given by Stubbs in his *Anatomic of Abuses* of a jollification that took place "against Maie-day, Whitsunday, or some other time of the year:" "They have twentie or fourtie yoke of oxen, every ox having a sweete nosegaie of flowers tyed on the tippe of his hornes, and these oxen draw home this Maie poole (this stinckynge idoll rather), which is covered all over with flowers and hearbes, bounde rounde aboute with stringes, from the top to the bottome, and somtyme painted with variable colours, with twoo or three hundred men, women and children followyng it with great devotion. And thus beyng reared up, with handkerchiefes and flagges streamyng on the toppe, they strawe the grounde aboute, binde greene

¹ Rhys, *Arth. Leg.*, ch. II.

² "Artus der meienbaere man," st. 281, l. 16.

³ See *New Eng. Dict.* and Jamieson's *Scottish Dict.*, s. v. *Beltane*.

⁴ Mannhardt, *Wald- und Feldkulte*, Berlin, 1877, p. 229 seq.; Frazer, *Golden Bough*, treatment of myths of Adonis, Dionysus, Attis, etc.

boughes about it, sett up sommer haules, bowers, and arbours, hard by it. And then fall they to banquet and feast, to leap and daunce aboute it, as the heathen people did at the dedication of their idolles, whereof this is a perfect patterne, or rather the thyng itself.”¹ That such festivities were held all over Europe is a fact so well known that it is useless to exemplify them further or to dwell upon the character of the ceremonial. Certain features from Celtic Britain, however, bring us very close to the fragmentary records preserved in the *Romances* concerning Arthur’s Round Table.

I quote from Frazer:² “In the central Highlands of Scotland bonfires, known as the Beltane fires, were formerly kindled with great ceremony on the first of May, and the traces of human sacrifices at them were particularly clear and unequivocal. The custom of lighting the bonfires lasted in many places far into the eighteenth century, and the descriptions of the ceremony by writers of that period present such a curious and interesting picture of primitive heathendom surviving in our own country that I will reproduce them in the words of their authors. The fullest of the descriptions, so far as I know, is the one bequeathed to us by John Ramsay, laird of Ochertyre, near Stirling, the patron of Burns and the friend of Sir Walter Scott. From his voluminous manuscripts, written in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, a selection has been published in recent years. The following account of Beltane is extracted from a chapter dealing with Highland superstitions. Ramsay says: ‘But the most considerable of the Druidical festivals is that of Beltane or May-day, which was lately observed in some parts of the Highlands with extraordinary ceremonies. Of later years it is chiefly attended to by young people, persons advanced in years considering it as inconsistent with

¹ Frazer, *G. B.*, I, 203; Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes*, 310.

² *G. B.*, III, 259–261.

their gravity to give it any countenance. Yet a number of circumstances relative to it may be collected from tradition, or the conversation of very old people, who witnessed this feast in their youth, when the ancient rites were better observed.

‘This festival is called in Gaelic *Beal-tene*—*i. e.*, the fire of Bel. . . . Like the other public worship of the Druids, the Beltane feast seems to have been performed on hills or eminences. They thought it degrading to him whose temple is the universe to suppose that he would dwell in any house made with hands. Their sacrifices were therefore offered in the open air, frequently upon the tops of hills, where they were presented with the grandest views of nature, and were nearest the seat of warmth and order. And, according to tradition, such was the manner of celebrating this festival in the Highlands within the last hundred years. But since the decline of superstition, it has been celebrated by the people of each hamlet on some hill or rising ground around which their cattle were pasturing. Thither the young folks repaired in the morning and cut a trench, on the summit of which a seat of turf was formed for the company. And in the middle a pile of wood or other fuel was placed, which of old they kindled with *tein-eigin*—*i. e.*, forced fire or *need fire*. . . .

‘After kindling the bonfire with the *tein-eigin* the company prepared their victuals. And as soon as they had finished their meal they amused themselves a while in singing and dancing round the fire. Towards the close of the entertainment, the person who officiated as master of the feast produced a large cake baked with eggs and scalloped round the edge, called *am bonnach beal-tine*—*i. e.*, the Beltane cake. It was divided into a number of pieces, and distributed in great form to the company. There was one particular piece which whoever got was called *cailleach bealtine*—*i. e.*, the Beltane *carline*, a term of great reproach. Upon his being

known, part of the company laid hold of him and made a show of putting him into the fire; but the majority interposing, he was rescued. And in some places they laid him flat on the ground, making as if they would quarter him. Afterwards, he was pelted with egg-shells, and retained the odious appellation during the whole year. And while the feast was fresh in people's memory, they affected to speak of the *cailleach beal-tine* as dead.' "

From the parish of Anstruther, Wester, the following is reported:—"On the 1st of May, O. S. a festival called Beltan is annually held here. It is chiefly celebrated by the cow-herds, who assemble by scores in the fields, to dress a dinner for themselves, of boiled milk and eggs. These dishes they eat with a sort of cakes baked for the occasion, and having small lumps in the form of *nipples* raised all over the surface."¹ To return to Frazer:—"In the northern part of Wales, that other great Celtic region of Britain, it used to be customary for every family to make a great bonfire called *Coel Coeth* on Hallowe'en. The fire was kindled on the most conspicuous spot near the house; and when it had nearly gone out every one threw into the ashes a white stone, which he had first marked. Then having said their prayers round the fire, they went to bed. Next morning, as soon as they were up, they came to search out the stones, and if any one of them was found to be missing, they had a notion that the person who threw it would die before he saw another Hallowe'en. A writer on Wales says 'that the autumnal fire is still kindled in North Wales, being on the eve of the first day of November, and is attended by many ceremonies; such as running through the fire and smoke, each casting a stone into the fire, and all running off at the conclusion to escape from the black short-tailed sow.

¹ Sinclair, *Stat. Acct.*, v, 84.

. . . On the following morning the stones are searched for in the fire, and if any be missing, they betide ill to those who threw them in.' According to Professor Rhys, the habit of celebrating Hallowe'en by lighting bonfires on the hills is perhaps not yet extinct in Wales, and men still living can remember how the people who assisted at the bonfires would wait till the last spark was out and then would suddenly take to their heels, shouting at the top of their voices, 'The cropped black sow seize the hindmost!' The saying, as Professor Rhys justly remarks, implies that originally one of the company became a victim in dead earnest. . . . We can now understand why in Lower Brittany every person throws a pebble into the midsummer bon-fire. Doubtless here, as in Wales and the Highlands of Scotland, omens of life and death have at one time or other been drawn from the position and state of the pebbles on the morning of All Saints' Day. The custom, thus found among three separate branches of the Celtic stock, probably dates from a period before their dispersion, or at least from a time when alien races had not yet driven home the wedges of separation between them."¹

Again:—"Far more important in Scotland, however, than the midsummer fires were the bonfires kindled on Allhallow Even or Hallowe'en, that is on the thirty-first of October, the day preceding All Saints' or Allhallows' Day. . . . Like the Beltane fires on the first of May, they seem to have prevailed most commonly in the Perthshire Highlands. On the evening of Hallowe'en 'the young people of every hamlet assembled upon some eminence near the houses. There they made a bonfire of ferns or other fuel, cut the same day, which from the feast was called *Samh-nag* or *Savnag*, a fire of rest and pleasure. Around it

¹ *Golden Bough*, III, 295-297.

was placed a circle of stones, one for each person of the families to whom they belonged. And when it grew dark the bonfire was kindled, at which a loud shout was set up. Then each person taking a torch of ferns or sticks in his hand, ran round the fire exulting ; and sometimes they went into the adjacent fields, where, if there was another company, they visited the bonfire, taunting the others if inferior in any respect to themselves. After the fire was burned out they returned home, where a feast was prepared, and the remainder of the evening was spent in mirth and diversions of various kinds. Next morning they repaired betimes to the bonfire, where the situation of the stones was examined with much attention. If any of them were misplaced, or if the print of a foot could be discerned near any particular stone, it was imagined that the person for whom it was set would not live out the year. Of late years this is less attended to, but about the beginning of the present century it was regarded as a sure prediction. The Hallowe'en fire is still kept up in some parts of the Low Country ; but on the western coast and in the isles it is never kindled, though the night is spent in merriment and entertainments.'”¹

From Callander, Perthshire, the Rev. James Robertson reports a similar custom on All Saints' Even : “ They set up bonfires in every village. When the bonfire is consumed, the ashes are carefully collected in the form of a circle. There is a stone put in, near the circumference, for every person of the several families interested in the bonfire ; and whatever stone is moved out of its place, or injured before the next morning, the person represented by the stone is devoted or *fey* ; and is supposed not to live twelve months from that day.”²

¹ *Golden Bough*, III, 293-4, quoting John Ramsay.

² Sinclair, *Stat. Acct.*, XI, 621 ; also *Golden Bough*, III, 294.

In this case we have a circle of stones, each stone representing a person who takes part in the ceremony. Can we not equate this circumstance with the fact that the name of every Round Table knight appears on the seat provided for him?

A still closer parallel from Callender remains to be cited. "The people of this district have two customs, which are fast wearing out, not only here, but all over the Highlands, and therefore ought to be taken notice of, while they remain. Upon the first of May, which is called *Bel-tan* or *Bal-tein* day, all the boys in a tow ship or hamlet, meet on the moors. They cut a table in the green sod, of a round figure, by casting a trench in the ground, of such circumference as to hold the whole company. They kindle a fire, and dress a repast of eggs and milk in the consistence of a custard. They knead a cake of oatmeal which is toasted at the embers against a stone. After the custard is eaten up, they divide the cake into so many portions, as similar as possible to one another in size and shape, as there are persons in the company. They daub one of these portions all over with charcoal, until it is perfectly black. They put all the bits of cake into a bonnet. Every one, blindfolded, draws out a portion. He who holds the bonnet is entitled to the last bit. Whoever draws the black bit is the *devoted* person who is to be sacrificed to *Baal*, whose favour they mean to implore, in rendering the year productive of the sustenance of man and beast. There is little doubt of these inhuman sacrifices having been once offered in this country, as well as in the east, although they now pass from the act of sacrificing, and only compel the *devoted* person to leap three times through the flames; with which the ceremonies of this festival are closed." ¹

¹ Sinclair, *Stat. Acct.*, xi, 620; also *Golden Bough*, iii, 262; Brand, i, 224-5.

Here at last we have for the repast an actual round table. It is crude and primitive, it is true, but the analogy of classic fable leads us to look for just such an object. From a hint of this sort the aetiological fancy passes readily to the splendid out-door feast on the meadow which Wolfram records.

We found that the establishment of the Round Table had a rather unintelligible Christian religious significance. This is exactly what we should expect if the account dealt with an original heathen ceremonial. There are many parallels in the legends of saints invented to explain local customs and in the adaptation of primitive rites to churchly uses. In harmony with this view is the close connection of the Round Table with the Grail, in which, whatever its source, a plenty talisman may easily be discerned.¹ Moreover, according to Wolfram, the Table was measured by moonlight on the grass, a circumstance which suggests some magical significance. While Wace ascribes the establishment of it to Arthur, the Merlin versions ascribe this to Uther, in whom we recognize, according to Rhys,² one of the names of the God of the Underworld, a region the divinities of which are very generally connected with agricultural observances. Leodogran, too, though we know little about him, may well have had, as the father of Guinevere, a mythological import. That Arthur, on a high feastday, refrains from eating until he has heard of some adventure, is possibly connected with primitive rites.³ But, above all, the fact that Uther serves the knights before himself eating, is hard to explain unless it be a reminiscence of the ceremonial action of the priest-king who has taken the place of the

¹ Hertz, *Parz.*, pp. 430-432. For heathen customs transformed into Christian, see Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, tr. Stallybrass, London, 1883-1900, I, 11 : 64 ; II, xxxiv seq.

² *Arth. Lëgend*, p. 9.

³ Hertz, *Parz.*, 512, n. 125.

original head of the family,¹ while the partakers of the common ritual meal form a brotherhood with all the ties of blood relationship.

The presence of women is also in accord with the usages of agricultural festivals. Indeed, the absolute necessity that each should be accompanied by her knight recalls a feature of sympathetic magic frequently indicated by worn-down survivals.² The wreathed heads, the procession,³ the games, and the songs of the jongleurs, are all paralleled in the May day festivities. Even the magnificence of Arthur's entertainments is a natural growth from the idea of that plenty for the obtaining of which these rites were held, rites which would end the king's grief and procure for him mysterious benefits and joys.⁴ The three usual occasions

¹ A parallel custom is preserved by Appian, *Bell. Mühr.*, 66; "Mithradates offered sacrifice to Zeus Stratius on a lofty pile of wood on a high hill according to the fashion of his country, which is as follows. First the kings themselves carry wood to the heap. Then they make a smaller pile encircling the other one, on which (the larger one) they pour milk, honey, wine, oil, and various kinds of incense. A banquet is spread on the ground for those present, in the same manner as was the custom at Pasargada in the solemn sacrifices of the Persian kings." See *Folk-Lore*, xv, 3, p. 306.

² The intercourse of the sexes has often been resorted to as a sympathetic charm to promote the growth of the crops, *Golden Bough*, II, 204-209. For the relation of the marriage of the May pair to vegetation, see Mannhardt, *Baumkultus*, ch. v. Mock marriage on May day, *Golden Bough*, III, 240. Marriages were a special feature of the fair at Tailltenn, Joyce, *Social Hist.*, II, 439. This notion will perhaps explain the men's refusal to come to Eochaid Airem's feast at Tara on the ground that he had no wife, and no man came to Tara without a wife.—Rhys, *Studies in Arth. Leg.*, p. 24; Zimmer, *Gött. gel. Anz.*, 1890, p. 519.

³ Only in Wolfram.

⁴ See p. 234, above. The object of agricultural rites, as Mannhardt and Frazer have shown, was to ward off evils and to procure benefits. A curious expression of this idea of plenty is found in Layamon, p. 544; Merlin prophesied that "a king should come of Uther Pendragon, that gleemen should make a board of this king's breast, and thereto sit poets very good and eat their will, ere they should thence go, and wine-draughts outdraw from this king's tongue, and drink and revel day and night; this game should last them to the world's end."

for the holding of Round Tables are to be identified with the folk festivals of May, Midsummer, and November, common among Celtic, as well as other peoples. That they recurred with perfect regularity is indicated by Uther's rule commanding the vassals to attend without further summons. Even the duration of the feasts, either four or eight days, is repeated in the Irish fairs and the Welsh Eisteddfodau.¹ The names of the knights on the seats suggests a comparison with the circles of stones representing the participants in Scotch and Welsh ceremonies, and the siege perilous, which destroys its occupant until the Grail hero shall achieve the adventure, may be explained as a survival of the original human sacrifice which we find preserved to the present day under such a variety of forms in the peasant observances of Europe.²

There is, it is true, no mention of a fire at Arthur's Round Table, a feature present universally in beltane festivals. But, as the ancient practices were transformed to fit them for representation in terms of courtly manners, it is difficult to see how this element could have been retained. San-Marte perceives in the fires of the giant of Mt. St. Michael,³ and in that of Kai and Bedwyr on the summit of Plinlimmon,⁴ a hint of the druidical practice.⁵ A more definite hint is perhaps conveyed by the monuments bearing the name of Arthur's Oven, at least one of which we know

¹ Possibly this was originally four or eight nights, the Celtic **half week** or week.

² For the mock human sacrifice substituted for a real one, see *Golden Bough*, II, 67 *seq.*

³ Geoffrey, Bk. x, ch. iii.

⁴ Kilhwch and Olwen in *Mabinogion*.

⁵ "Es scheint auf druidischen Feuerdienst zu deuten, dessen Andenken jedoch im Märchen schon verwischt und verblichen ist." *Beiträge zur bretonischen und celtisch-germanischen Heldensage*, Quedlingen, 1847, p. 65. Is it too fanciful to imagine that the attempted burning of Guinevere, of Iseut, and of Lunet might have originated in an ancient sacrifice by fire?

to have been thus called as early as the year.1113.¹ It is, however, perfectly legitimate to presume that such a feature as this might readily vanish from an Arthurian tradition which has preserved so few fragments of information concerning the Round Table feasts.

A more important objection to the theory presented in this paper is the distinct statement of Wace that the Round Table was established for the express purpose of preventing quarrels for precedence among Arthur's knights, each of whom thought himself the best, and Layamon's repetition of this statement, coupled with a circumstantial account of a bloody fight at a banquet, the very fight which furnished the reason for the construction of a table of this form. Fights on such occasions were, as Dr. Brown has shown,² not infrequent in Celtic antiquity, and Layamon's story is in all probability based on a Welsh folk-tale. The importance assigned to rank and the pains taken to arrange banqueters in the proper order were, moreover, notably characteristic of both Irish and Welsh custom. Each detail of position at table and right to certain portions of food is provided for in the ancient laws.³ A deviation from such custom would, therefore, undoubtedly make an extraordinary impression, which would naturally be preserved in legend.

Yet, we are tempted to ask, how could a round table secure equality in greater degree than one of any other shape. Proximity to the royal seat would in this case indicate degree of honor just as fully as at a long table. On this point we are fortunately not left to mere hypothesis. The actual fact is established for us on the evidence of

¹ *Zs. f. franz. Spr. und Litt.*, XIII, p. 109.

² *The Round Table before Wace, Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, vol. VII.

³ Joyce, *Social Hist.*, II, 105; Rhys and Brynmor-Jones, *Welsh People*, 201.

Posidonius :¹—"The Celtae place food before their guests, putting grass for their seats, and they serve it upon wooden tables raised a very little above the ground. . . . But when many of them sup together, they all sit in a circle ; and the bravest sits in the middle, like the coryphaeus of a chorus ; because he is superior to the rest either in his military skill, or in birth, or in riches : and the man who gives the entertainment sits next to him ; and then on each side the rest of the guests sit in regular order, according as each is eminent or distinguished for anything." In this case there is a Round Table of warriors, closely resembling Arthur's feasts, yet each is tenaciously observant of the rights belonging to his rank.

Wace's statement, however, is definite, and could hardly have been his own invention. On the other hand, experience teaches us to be suspicious of explanations provided to account for customs the real origin of which has been forgotten. This equality predicated by Wace is particularly open to question, and Layamon's folk-tale, which bears on the face of it the appearance of having been added for aetiological purposes, may originally have had no connection whatever with the Round Table.² In the Arthurian stories there is no consistent evidence of such equality, and the very strictness of the rules of precedence at Celtic courts makes it impossible that any body of real vassals could have stood permanently in such a relation to one another. But, as we have seen, the Round Table feasts were not of every day occurrence ; they were ceremonial functions and, according to the theory advanced, they were agricultural festivals. Now this very feature of inversion of ranks, the social

¹ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, translated by C. D. Yonge, London, 1854, vol. I, p. 245, Bk. IV, ch. 36. The passing of the wine *deisiol* suggests that the feast here described may have been ceremonial.

² See quotation from Ten Brink, *Round Table before Wace*, p. 190, n. 3.

equality for a brief period of masters with their servants, or even slaves, is found in many rustic celebrations.

Every one will recall at once the Saturnalia at Rome. "The distinction between the free and the servile classes was temporarily abolished. The slave might rail at his master, intoxicate himself like his betters, sit down at table with them, and not even a word of reproof would be administered to him for conduct which at any other season might have been punished with stripes, imprisonment, or death. Nay, more, masters actually changed places with their slaves and waited on them at table; and not till the serf had done eating and drinking was the board cleared and dinner set for his master."¹ Precisely this trait appears in Uther's refusal to eat until he has served the knights of his Round Table.

The same custom prevailed in Great Britain. It is thus described by Robert Bloomfield :²—

"Now, ere sweet Summer bids its long adieu,
And winds blow keen where late the blossom grew,
The bustling day and jovial night must come,
The long accustomed feast of harvest-home . . .
Behold the sound oak table's massy frame
Beside the kitchen floor ! nor careful dame
And generous host invite their friends around,
For all that clear'd the crop, or till'd the ground
Are guests by right of custom :—old and young ; . . .
Here once a year distinction lowers its crest,
The master, servant, and the merry guest,
Are equal all ; and round the happy ring
The reaper's eyes exulting glances fling,
And, warm'd with gratitude, he quits his place,
With sun-burnt hands and ale-enliven'd face,
Refills the jug, his honor'd host to tend,
To serve at once the master and the friend ;
Proud thus to meet his smiles, to share his tale,
His nuts, his conversation, and his ale."

¹ *Golden Bough*, III, 139.

² *The Farmer's Boy*, *Summer*.

Among others Strutt also records this custom: "The harvest-supper in some places is called a mell supper, and a churn supper; at which, Bourne tells us, 'the servant and his master are alike, and everything is done with equal freedom: they sit at the same table, converse freely together, and spend the remaining part of the night in dancing and singing, without any difference or distinction.'"¹ "I once thought," says Brand, "that the northern name of the entertainment given on this occasion, *i. e.*, Mell-supper, was derived from the French word *mesler*, to mingle or mix together, the master and servant sitting promiscuously at the same table. . . . All being upon an equal footing, or, as the northern vulgar idiom has it, 'Hail fellow well met.'"²

The equality ascribed to Arthur's knights need not, then, have grown out of any such incident as that narrated by Layamon. Yet we may be sure that some sort of a contest was a feature of the popular festival. The Round Table tournaments,³ so frequently described in the romances and which subsisted to the close of the Middle Ages, had their parallels in primitive custom. "Posidonius in the third and also in the twentieth book of his Histories, says—'The Celtae sometimes have single combats at their entertainments. For being collected in arms, they go through the exercise, and make feints at, and sometimes they even go so far as to wound one another. And being irritated by this, if the bystanders do not stop them, they will proceed even

¹ *Sports and Pastimes*, London, 1810, p. 321: Brand refers to this equality at the harvest-supper as general, II, 16.

² Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, II, 27, note. For the word *mell*, see *English Dialect Dictionary* of Wright.

³ An interesting example is offered even in the reign of Henry VIII, though it is not called a Round Table. The king and his followers rode to the wood to fetch the May, and after this held a three days' tournament. Hall's *Chronicle*, London, 1803, p. 520. For connection between May and jousts, see Du Cange, s. v. *Maium*, "Eodem *Maii* nomine designari videtur hastiludii species, in charta ann. 1346."

to kill one another. But in olden times,' he continues, 'there was a custom that a hind quarter of pork was put on the table, and the bravest man took it; and if anyone else laid claim to it, then the two rose up to fight till one of them was slain.'"¹ An incident of the former kind is narrated in Geoffrey's chronicle;²—In honor of his second victory over Cæsar, Cassebelaunus assembles his nobles and their wives and offers an immense sacrifice, after which a great feast is held. In the games that ensue, his nephew and another young nobleman fight in earnest and the nephew is slain. We seem to have here the remains of such a contest as the pretended battle between companies of herdsmen on the Lupercal,³ the struggle between summer and winter,⁴ and the attack and defence of Hallowe'en fires.⁵

The aetiological myth originates as an explanation of rude primitive rites. With the development of the story, the petty chiefs of shepherds, herdsmen and farmers grow into heroic demi-gods and mighty kings, and the manners and practices of a more civilized age clothe and almost hide the early customs. Yet, while these tales acquire literary form and poetic coloring, the ancient ritual subsists almost unaltered among the peasantry, and by comparing the tale and the ritual we can, in the identity of incident and usage, discern their mutual relationship. In the present case, though the investigation deals, not with a narrative, but with an institution, the same principles are operative. All the known features of Arthur's Round Table are found in primitive agricultural celebrations. It is true that no one

¹ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, vol. I, p. 248, Bk. IV, c. 40. See also *Litt. Celtique*, VI, 53.

² IV, viii. Wace, with greater detail, 4407-4459.

³ Mannhardt, *Myth. Forsch.*, 77.

⁴ *Golden Bough*, II, 99 seq.; Brand, I, 246.

⁵ Brand, I, 389.

festival, as recently practised, contains them all, yet this fact furnishes no valid ground for objection, since the details of these observances exhibit a certain fluidity and the traits of one pass readily into any of the others. "The Whitsontide Holydays," says Strutt,¹ "were celebrated by various pastimes commonly practised upon other festivals," and the same remark may be applied to any one of this group. Bonfires, fighting, inversion of ranks, together with feasting, dancing and singing, are found equally at May, Midsummer and Autumn. Every observance mentioned is attested on Celtic ground, while the most essential feature of the whole, an actual round table in the grassy field, survived even in the eighteenth century folk-custom of Scotland to indicate the original character of Arthur's feasts. Voyaging back through the ages, we can imagine a band of ancient Celts, all of the same clan, gathering to perform their sacrificial rites around what was, perhaps, their symbol of the sun, a circular table cut in the sod. As the clan is included in the nation, the festival of the king acquires greater prominence than the local observances, yet still preserves the essential features of its prototypes.² Arthur, whether agricultural god or semi-historical leader, naturally attracts these ceremonies to his court, and then the French poets, transforming the Celtic hero into a magnificent emperor, conceive of the Round Table as the centre around which his peerless knights gather for feasts and tournaments which reflect the courtly etiquette of mediæval society.

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¹ *Sports and Pastimes*, p. 316. For confusion of festivals see Chamber's *Mediæval Stage*, Oxford, 1903, I, 256.

² The fact, mentioned above, p. 233, that tradition has preserved the record of at least three Round Tables confirms the theory of such a development.